DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 328 941 EA 021 791

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TITLE The Journey toward Educational Leadership: Reflective Voyages of Four Teachers.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Boston, MA, April 16-20, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrator Education; *Case Studies; College School Cooperation; *Educational Innovation; *Experiential Learning; Higher Education; *Leadership Training; *Professional Development; Schools of Education
IDENTIFIERS *Reflective Thinking

ABSTRACT

Recent research has suggested that administrator preparation programs based exclusively on university courses are not very effective. Individuals progressing through innovative programs allowing greater opportunities for reflection and collaborative school/university activities should be better prepared to deal with the complex issues facing future educational leaders. This paper reviews a recent study examining the personal and professional transition of four experienced classroom teachers who participated in experiential and reflective leadership programs sponsored by the Danforth Foundation and two different universities during the 1988-89 academic year. Each participant was interviewed three times during the year. Witnesses to the transitional process (teacher colleagues, mentor administrators, social friends, and family members) were also interviewed. Participants were asked to maintain logs of insights and feelings experienced during the program. All four teachers indicated that tremendous personal and professional growth had occurred as a result of participating in the program. Three participants were less inclined to seek formal administrative positions after participating in the program. However, all four were open to pursuing formal positions at some future time. All four reported a more positive view of administration and referred to themselves as leaders. Those that remained teachers are serving as team leaders, committee chairs, and assuming other leadership positions not previously open to them. (Five references.) (MLH)

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THE JOURNEY TOWARD EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP:

REFLECTIVE VOYAGES OF FOUR TEACHERS

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April, 1990

EA 021 791

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THE JOURNEY TOWARD EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP: REFLECTIVE VOYAGES OF FOUR TEACHERS

A traditional view regarding the ways in which future educational leaders are prepared for their roles suggests that those interested in such positions would self-select into university-based educational administration programs, follow a prescribed program of graduate-level courses, obtain a degree, and then go out looking for a job. Inherent in this perspective is that one learns to be a school leader by following the route to certification or licensure as an educational administrator (i.e., as an assistant principal, principal, central office administrator, or superintendent). Also, it is assumed traditionally that one learns how to lead through participation in courses prescribed as part of a university curriculum. As that assumption has been questioned over the years, there has been a strong suggestion that learning how to lead is only accomplished after a person has gone through "the hoops" of a university program and taken a first job "in the real world."

This view has been challenged with increasing frequency and vigor during the past few years. Recent reform proposals related to the improvement of educational leadership programs (e.g., the

National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration [Griffiths, Stout, & Forsyth, 1988] and the National Policy Board on Administrator Preparation [1989]) have suggested that existing practices are inadequate to the extent that people are truly being made ready to assume school leadership roles. In specific, there is a strong suggestion that programs which rely exclusively on traditional university courses are not very effective. Further, there is an increasingly powerful expectation that educational leadership would be something that is conceptualized as being considerably more broad-based and broadly-defined as it is now, with most attention being directed toward the business of certifying people who wish to move into traditional, formal educational administrative roles. Second, the expectation exists that effective leadership preparation programs need to emphasize the importance of the individual participant engaging in ongoing reflection as a way to assume greater self-direction toward personalized career goals and objectives. In short, it has been assumed that leadership preparation is something which comes from within the individual. It is not something which an external agency bestows upon an applicant.

We have four objectives in this paper related to the ways in which some individuals have gone through alternative leadership preparation programs:

1. We will provide an overview of a recent study which looked at the personal and professional transition of four experienced classroom teachers who participated in experiential and reflective leadership preparation programs during the 1988-89 school year.
2. A description will be provided concerning the nature and goals of reflective and experiential leadership preparation programs in general.
3. We will indicate the ways in which four individuals were perceived to change as they progressed through reflective leadership preparation programs.
4. Implications derived from this study will be used to suggest some ways in which leadership preparation programs might be refined and improved in the future.

We make the assumption that individuals who progress through leadership preparation programs which emphasize greater opportunities for individual reflection, if also based on reliance on collaborative activities involving universities and local school systems, would be better prepared to deal with the complex issues facing educational leaders in the future. Specifically, we expected that individuals who were involved in innovative preparation programs would probably demonstrate greater confidence, self-awareness, and, in general, a much deeper understanding of leadership and self as they engaged in a

personal transition process from one educational role to another (i.e., from teacher to administrator) or during the shift from classroom teacher to teacher leader.

Study Methodology

The study described in this paper consisted of the preparation of four case studies which described the processes of transition followed by four teachers who participated in experiential and reflective leadership preparation programs sponsored by the Danforth Foundation and two different universities during the 1988-89 academic year. This is but the first phase of a two-part study that will examine the overall transition of individuals from the role of classroom teacher to educational leader. In this present phase, the emphasis is on the immediate reactions of individuals while and after they moved through innovative leadership preparation programs. The second phase of the study, currently in the midst of data-collection, looks at the ways in which people move from preparation programs back into the normal work force as administrators, lead teachers, or as teachers who have participated in a focused learning experience. Additional phases are likely to be added in the future as a way to determine the long-term impact of experiential preparation programs.

The primary data-collecting method that was utilized in the study has been the structured interview. In fact, each of the four participants involved in this project was interviewed at three specific times during the 1988-89 academic year: At the beginning of involvement in an experiential and innovative leadership preparation program (Pre-Transition Interview), mid-way through the school year (Mid-Transition Interview), and at the conclusion of formal participation in the leadership preparation programs (Post-Transition Interview). This interviewing schedule followed the framework utilized in a similar recent study of the career transition issues faced by first year high school principals (Diederich, 1988) which, in turn, made extensive use of a data-collection process suggested by Schlossberg (1976). The process of interviewing the individuals proceeding through the transition process was augmented in this study as the researchers also carried out extensive on-site interviews with other individuals who were able to witness the transitional processes and development demonstrated by the research subjects during the year. These other individuals included colleague teachers, mentor administrators, social friends, and spouses and other family members.

In addition to the multiple interviews that were carried out during the academic year, research subjects were also asked to maintain reflective logs which provided periodic insights into the

feelings that were experienced during the course of the program. These were reviewed by the researchers at six times during the school year. Finally, the subjects were asked to analyze case studies, and their analyses were recorded by the researchers. Their responses were reviewed by the researchers as a way to gain additional insights regarding the transitional processes that were being followed.

Research Subjects

The four individuals who participated in this study were all classroom teachers who were candidates in two different innovative, experiential leadership programs that emphasized reliance on field-based learning and personal reflection. These programs were co-sponsored by local universities and the Danforth Foundation which has been promoting the development of a number of alternative leadership preparation programs during the past four years. Approximately 25 individuals at the two universities selected for participation in this research project were enrolled in these programs during the 1988-89 school year.

The research subjects who served as the primary data source for our work were selected by local university-based program facilitators as "typical" representatives of their programs. All individuals had

extensive experience as classroom teachers. Although all four people were committed to the goals of their local Danforth Programs, two individuals also expressed considerable reluctance to go into formal school administration roles at the outset of their participation in these alternative programs. Two people began their participation by indicating great interest in finding principalships (or assistant principalships) and pursuing formal administrative careers prior to entering the programs. Three of the subjects were women. Two teachers worked in elementary schools, and two came from secondary school backgrounds (middle, junior, or senior high schools).

Experiential Leadership Preparation Programs

The two pairs of participants came from different university-based leadership preparation programs that were sponsored in part by the Danforth Foundation. In the Fall of 1986, this organization announced its support of innovative programs that were designed to prepare future school principals and other leaders in ways that would be different from existing, traditional approaches. The result of this was the Danforth Foundation Program for the Preparation of School Principals, now being implemented at 24 universities across the United States (Playko & Daresh, 1988).

While training strategies used to prepare educational leaders at

each of the participating institutions have differed, the primary objectives of the Foundation have remained constant over the past four years:

1. To work with selected university faculties to think and act boldly in developing alternative programs for the preparation of principals and other leaders, in collaboration with practicing school administrators;

2. To develop future leaders' knowledge, attitudes, and skills about school leadership through methods not traditionally included in university programs;

3. To enable aspiring school leaders to gain practical skills prior to accepting their first administrative positions.

Each participating university was encouraged to develop strategies and procedures that would address these aims in creative and diverse ways. The two institutions selected for inclusion in this study had developed programs that were consistent with the goals of the Danforth Foundation, but which also differed in structure and strategies used in preparing individuals for future leadership roles.

Conclusions and Findings

Our analyses of the interview data and the reflections of the Danforth candidates' reflective logs suggested a number of themes that appear to have significance in light of efforts to reform educational leadership preparation programs across the nation.

First, all four individual indicated that they recognized tremendous personal and professional growth that occurred in their lives as a result of their participation in the program. This growth was defined in terms of the mentors' perceptions that they had increased their overall intellectual development (through exposure to a great many new ideas), and through the acquisition of additional administrative skills (largely through their contact with practicing school administrators who served as mentors in the program). Another insight shared frequently by the four teachers was the belief that they had also grown in professional responsibility. They indicated that they believed that they were considerably more committed to the field of professional education after having participated in this leadership development program.

A second observation that came from the study was that, with the exception of one of the four teachers, participants indicated that they were less inclined to seek formal administrative positions after participating in the program. In fact, this reduction of interest appeared to follow a certain path during the course of the year. People began the year with a fairly strong stated commitment to going through the program as a way to obtain principalships during the next school year. This interest in formal administration declined throughout the first semester, and by the time when the Mid-

Transition interview was conducted in January, all four participants seemed to have lost all interest in pursuing administrative careers. Three of the four teachers continued to express doubt concerning future pursuit of principalships throughout the remainder of the school year, but not at the level indicated at mid-year. One individual changed her mind completely shortly after February, and she began to express a very strong interest in finding an administrative position as soon as possible.

Third, at the conclusion of the school year, all four participants expressed an at least an openness to the notion of pursuing formal positions at some time in the future. Two of the people indicated that their first priorities would be to return to the classroom immediately. One person, as noted earlier, was aggressively seeking an administrative post, and the fourth person began to look seriously at the possibility of applying for an assistant principalship in her school district. The critical issue here was that there was a drastic reversal from the negative views of administration expressed only a few months earlier. All four individuals reported a more positive view toward administration in general. Furthermore, the four teachers frequently referred to themselves as leaders. There was a definite change in self-perception at the conclusion of their involvement in the Danforth programs.

Fourth, descriptions that were offered by friends, family members, mentors, co-workers, and other associates of the Danforth candidates were consistent with the self descriptions that were provided by the four participating teachers. All four individuals were generally recognized as outstanding leaders as the year progressed. However, those who knew the four teachers all remarked that they were not surprised that the individuals were successful at the conclusion of the Danforth experience. There was a general perception that the four individuals were "destined to be successful" because they were already effective professionals long before being selected as candidates in special leadership development programs. Participation in the Danforth program was viewed as a way in which the four people were able to find ways of demonstrating their competence.

The final finding was related to the previous observation. While great development was noted in all four individuals after their participation in the innovative leadership programs, it remained unclear as to the extent to which such programs would have been perceived as effective had the individuals selected for participation had not been of such great ability before the programs began. In other words, it was likely that the researchers had witnessed the development of very talented individuals, but less able people might

not have experienced the same type of growth and development after participating in exactly the same programs.

In terms of the general conclusions that could be derived from this study, perhaps the most obvious is that the quality of initial selection of candidates into innovative programs might be the most important part of the program development. Good people will produce good results in terms of program outcomes. In all of our interviews, we discovered that no one expressed surprise that the four teachers we were following were apparently having positive experiences in the Danforth program. While the four leadership candidates were participating in a program designed to increase leadership skills, all were viewed as leaders well before participating in any special programs. The lesson that might be learned from this is that, if leadership preparation programs are to be effective and successful, then care must be taken to ensure that people with high potential for success are selected for participation. Current admissions practices in many institutions might be examined carefully to determine if these practices are likely to yield people with great leadership potential. At present, many leadership preparation programs make use of a rather open admission policy, and we wonder if this might be reconsidered if a goal is to produce extremely effective educational leaders in the future.

Another general reflection that we have had as a result of this

study concerns the basic definition of the goals of leadership preparation programs in general. Until fairly recently, "leadership preparation" tended to be synonymous with "educational administration training." In other words, all people who followed paths to school leadership were intent upon receiving training and certification as formal school administrators--assistant principals, principals, or superintendents. Our observations from this study have suggested that there are many highly qualified future school leaders who have no interest--at least immediately--in pursuing careers as school administrators. We are continuing to collect data concerning our four teachers, one year after they completed the Danforth programs. Only one of the four is now in an administrative position in a school district. The other individuals are once again serving as classroom teachers. However, we are now finding that the three who are teachers are now perceived by others and by themselves as educational leaders. They are serving as team leaders, committee chairs, and taking on many special assignments that were not open to them before participating in the Danforth programs. We believe that they are educational leaders, whether or not they ever become school administrators. Consequently, the vision of what the goals of an "educational leadership" program should be need to be revisited to include the likelihood that leadership does not reside solely in the

principal's or superintendent's office. The activities that were included in the two Danforth programs that we examined certainly seemed to be effective in developing skills for all future leaders. We suspect that all educational leadership programs of the future will need to become increasingly sensitive to this expanded conceptualization of leadership in schools.

Summary

We believe that this study was important for two principal reasons. First, it provided some insights into the potency of two innovative leadership preparation programs that were sponsored by the Danforth Foundation. These programs emphasized personal development rather than simple adherence to university-prescribed curricula. The candidates in these programs did not simply engage in the typical pursuit of courses in educational administration that appear on check lists required by academic departments or state education agencies. Rather, there was considerable attention paid to field-based learning, personal reflection and formation, as well as sound academic preparation.

Second, the study suggested that there is considerable importance that should be attached to the initial selection and recruitment of people into educational leadership programs. It is

clear that such practices are the most important part of the entire leadership preparation process. In general, we believe that, while programs might have a powerful effect on participant development, when people are not talented in the first place, programs are not likely to have a very powerful impact. On the other hand, programs that are designed so that they emphasize reflection and personal development clearly have a powerful effect on very capable individuals.

All of the findings and conclusions derived from this study are able to provide further insights to those who are currently involved with the development of new approaches to leadership development across the nation. While we looked at the personalized voyages of four teachers who participated in Danforth programs in this study, we are convinced that similar efforts to promote more effective school leadership may be promoted in a variety of other settings across the nation.

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